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County hears vote center ideas

Johnson County clerk shares how neighbor implemented change

By C. M. SCHMIDLKOFER
Staff writer

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The Shelby County Election Board had an informational public meeting Thursday to explore voting location options in the county.

Johnson County Clerk Sue Anne Misiniec was guest speaker, invited by Shelby County Clerk Vicki Franklin.

Misiniec shared Johnson County's experience using voting centers for the first time during the 2012 primary and general elections, answered questions and offered tips to Shelby County leadership and political party boards to consider when discussing whether Shelby County could benefit from moving from precinct voting to voting centers.

Voting centers are polling places connected through secure Internet connections where eligible voters in the county may cast ballots through an electronic poll book that is instantaneously updated. Since legislation became effective in 2010 for Indiana counties to have the option of vote centers, they have become increasingly popular due to the potential cost savings and convenience that comes with the option.

Misiniec said Johnson County, which has approximately three times the number of registered voters of Shelby County, reduced the number of voting locations from 72 to 22 when it switched from precinct voting to voting centers. The county has 134 precincts in nine townships.

Six of the voting centers were open the week prior to the election between 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., which suited workers there and voters traveling to and from work or school, Misiniec said.

The centers were also open during Election Day, along with the county courthouse, during the required hours from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Three centers including the courthouse were open on the two Saturdays prior to the election.

"It decreased our costs," Misiniec said, due to the reduced number of precinct workers needed.

Voting locations were carefully selected based on populations in the county, with higher concentrations situated in the northern section where greater numbers of residents inhabit.

"We did not have a vote center in every township," she said. "Some counties do that."

Community centers, major churches, libraries and one township trustee's office were utilized for the centers based on convenience and location.

"It takes a little planning and organization, obviously," Misiniec said. "But it is very convenient for the voters. We heard

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that from the voters. They loved it because they were no longer restricted to their precinct to get there between those hours to vote. They could be there at the times available."

The biggest expense to the county was the cost of the electronic polling books, needed to review or process voter information during elections while preventing voter fraud, and a contract with an e-polling book vendor.

"It's a requirement of voter center law if you're going to be a vote center county, you must have those electronic poll books," she said.

Misiniec said 250 of Johnson County's 478 voting machines were used at the centers. Their election board chose to hard-wire voter center locations, although Wi-Fi is available. Tablets or laptop computers were purchased for each voting center which is required to have two per location.

And while Shelby County currently pays \$50 per precinct location for rent and janitorial expenses in 36 locations throughout its 43 precincts, Johnson County did not pay any of its locations.

Misiniec said the libraries, churches and other large places were happy to have voter centers situated there.

"It gets people in there to see what they have," she said.

She urged Shelby County to obtain a formal agreement from its commissioners and council members approving its pursuit of voting centers before spending the time and money to do so and to recruit at least one member from each and one member from each political party into a fact-finding committee.

"Those folks need to be dedicated," she said. "I can say we couldn't have done it without them in Johnson County."

Establishing the committee was the first order of business after obtaining a resolution from its county council and commissioners supporting its pursuit of a voter center concept.

"That didn't mean they were all in favor," she said. "But they voted 'yes.'"

Shelby County Election Deputy Jeff Sponsel asked how Misiniec reached voters to notify them of the changes and new vote center locations.

Due to the county's decision to move to voter centers very shortly before the primary election, Misiniec said time was of the essence.

The board's first step was to send out postcards to the households of registered voters in the county.

"That is very, very costly," she said.

Helpful were the civic meetings to notify the public, handouts, utilizing the media and including information on county, library and other voting center location websites.

"For the general election, we didn't do postcards," she said. "We contacted the larger churches, not just those at the voting centers, and asked if they would include the passouts in their bulletins, and they were willing to do that."

Franklin said the next step will be for the election board to form a committee, asking for representatives from county commissioners, council members and political parties to participate.

"Obviously, we need to make some changes," Franklin said. "This is the time to look at voting centers as an option."

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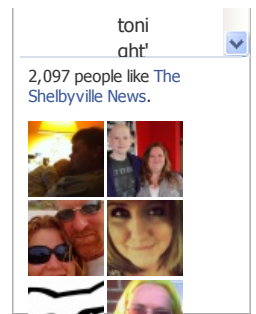
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